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Remarks at a Unity Reception in Coral Gables

December 11, 1999

Thank you very much. Well, first of all, I want to thank Senator Torricelli for that uncommonly generous introduction. He thwarted one of my rules of politics. Normally, when you get an introduction like that, it's from someone you've appointed to a good office. *[Laughter]* And so he just did it out of the goodness of his heart and a laundry list of what I'll have to do for New Jersey next year. *[Laughter]* And I thank him for that.

I want to thank Congressman Kennedy for his leadership. He's done a wonderful job. And his father, who is a very, very close friend of mine, is actually proud of him, but too proud to admit it—that he has a son as the only chairman in the Kennedy family.

I want to thank Bill Nelson and his wonderful wife, Grace, for making this race for the United States Senate. And I want to thank my longtime friend Elaine Bloom, who was on my committee when I started in Florida in 1991, for making this race for Congress. And she can win this race if she gets the kind of support that I see around this place tonight.

And most important of all, I want to thank Chris and Irene for letting me come back again to this humble abode—*[laughter]*—that makes the White House look like public housing. *[Laughter]* You know, you look out here and you expect Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn to come up on the *African Queen* any minute. *[Laughter]* I mean, it is amazing. I want to thank them for their generosity. I want to thank Andrew, Kristina, and Angela for being here—their wonderful children.

Thank you, Gene Prescott, for having us over to your and Coral Gables great hotel, which I love so much. And thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for being here.

You might ask yourself, what am I doing here, besides the fact that I would come to see Chris and Irene at the drop of a hat. I'm not running for anything, and I can't.

I'm here because, number one, the things that we've done in the last 7 years would not have been possible had it not been for the support of the Democrats in the House and the Senate. And I've worked with the Republicans whenever I could. I think the record will reflect, when all the evidence is in, that I have been far more forthcoming toward them than they have toward me—although we had a pretty good little mutual deal going at the end of the last budget session.

But the truth is that when it came to the '93 budget, which started this economic recovery and started us on the road to getting rid of the terrible deficit, it was only members of my party that voted for it. We would never passed the Brady bill or the crime bill of '94, with its 100,000 police and its assault weapons ban, if it hadn't been for the members of our party. We would have never been able to defend the environment and continue to make the progress we have from the Everglades to the redwoods in California to setting aside 40 million acres, roadless acres, in our national forests, if it weren't for the Democrats.

We wouldn't have 2 million more children with health insurance since 1997 if it weren't for the Democrats. And if we had a few more Democrats—in this last session, we did get 100,000 teachers, 50,000 police, 60,000 housing vouchers for poor people to move from welfare to work. We doubled the after-school programs, and we got money for the first time for States to turn around or shut down schools that are failing. So we had a good run. But if we had a few more Democrats, we also would have gotten a Patients' Bill of Rights, an increase in the minimum wage, hate crimes legislation, and goodness knows what else—something that's very important to Florida—we would have gotten a national effort, the first national effort ever, to try to help school districts build or repair school facilities. This is very important.

You know, I went to Jupiter not very long ago—some of you may remember that—they had 12 house trailers out behind the grade school. And I was up in Tampa, and there was a woman who was in my high school class, and in my grade school graduating class, who is in the administration of the school district in Tampa. And we were great

pals from the time we were 9 years old. And, you know, I went to Tampa High School, and they had four or five housetrailer out behind the high school. And at a time when we think education is so important, I think it's a good reason for having a few more Democrats.

I want you to understand that, number one, what we have done would not have been possible without them, the people they represent; and number two, the country has a lot more to do.

I've given a lot of speeches today. I started out at the Florida Democratic Convention where, 8 years ago this week, I got the first victory I received in the Presidential primaries, in the Florida straw poll—where we got over a majority of the vote and I went from being an anonymous person who was running fifth in the national polls to somebody who actually had a chance. And then it took us 4 more years of hard work, but we won Florida in the Presidential election in '96, Al Gore and I did. And I'm very grateful for that. So my heart is full of gratitude tonight.

But I want to just say a couple of things really quickly. First of all, people will probably ask you why you came here, and whether it was worth the money. And you need to have an answer other than that you wanted to visit Chris and Irene's house. I'm being serious now.

We are about to have the millennial election. This country has been around here for more than 200 years because more than half the time we make the right decisions.

And I want to tell you a story. One of my brothers-in-law is here. I got my big extended family together, including my two nephews, for Thanksgiving up at Camp David. And then after Thanksgiving, I had some of my friends come up because they had little kids to play with the nephews. And on the Saturday morning after Thanksgiving, this 6-year-old girl came up to me, this beautiful child, and she looked at me, and she said, "Now, how old are you anyway?" [Laughter] And I looked at her, and I said, "I am 53." And she said, "Oh, that's a lot." [Laughter] Which lamentably is the truth.

But what I want to say to you—and I'd like for you all to remember, search your own memories—in my lifetime we have never had

a time like this, where we had this much economic prosperity, this much social progress, this much national self-confidence, and the absence of any overwhelming crisis at home or threat from abroad. It has not happened in my lifetime.

So I'm very glad that I could be President in these last 7 years, and that I've got 14 more months to try to keep chunking away at this, and move this country forward. I think we have built a bridge to the 21st century. I think we have turned the country around. I'm elated by it. And I feel gratified by it.

But the real issue is, what are we going to do now? And I'll bet you anybody here who's lived any number of years can remember a time—in your personal life, your family life, or your work life—when things were going so well you lost your concentration, you thought it would last forever, but you got divided or distracted, and something bad happened; or at least you didn't maximize your opportunities.

Well, countries are no different from that. And this country, while things are going very well—it is true—we have the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years, the lowest welfare rolls in 32 years, the lowest poverty rates in 20 years, the highest homeownership in history, 20 million jobs, and, come February, the longest economic expansion in the history of the country. Things are going well for us.

But it is important that we all understand that this country is going to have big challenges and big opportunities early in the next century. And we have never had a chance before, in my lifetime, to shape the future of our dreams for our children.

So when people ask you why you were here tonight. I think you ought to say, well, it's not much of an argument anymore. That crowd did a pretty good job. They've got a good record, but, more importantly, they're focused on the right things.

The outcome of the elections of 2000 will be determined, in my judgment, if we work hard enough not on whether they will have more money than we will—they will; they will have more money than we will. So the question is, will we have enough?

But the real question is, the outcome, in my judgment—I've been doing this a long

time—will turn on what the election is about, which is why you have to be able to say that to people. When people ask you why you were here, you have to be able to give an answer.

And what I think we ought to be focused on—you ought to say, I'm for the Democrats because they've done a good job, and because they will do the best job of dealing with the big opportunities and the big challenges before this country. And I do not want to see us squander the opportunity of a lifetime, at least the opportunity of 53 years.

What are we going to do? You live in Florida. What are we going to do about the aging of America? There will be twice as many people over 65 in 30 years. We have got to run Social Security out beyond the life expectancy of the baby boomers. We've got to run Medicare out and provide a prescription drug coverage for these poor elderly people, 75 percent of them can't afford their drugs.

We've got to do something to give all these kids—we've got the largest and most diverse student population we've ever had—we've got to give all of them a world-class education. One of the things I'm proudest of Al Gore for is that 5 years ago we decided we were going to hook up all the poor schools as well as the rich schools to the Internet. And we got the so-called E-rate, which gives discounts of up to 90 percent to the poor schools. Five years ago, 4 percent of the classrooms and 14 percent of the schools were hooked up. Today, over 50 percent of the classrooms; over 80 percent of the schools have an Internet connection. We're committed to this. But there's a lot to do.

Doesn't it bother you that we've had this great economic recovery, and there are still people in places that have been left behind? How are we going to keep it going?

Well, we ought to keep—first of all, we ought not to have a tax cut so big we can't pay the debt down. Under my budget we'll be out of debt in 15 years, for the first time since 1835. And that means lower interest rates on everything. The average American family today is saving \$2,000 a year in home mortgage costs, \$200 a year on car payment costs, and \$200 a year on college loan costs because we're paying the debt down, not running it up.

Number two, we ought to give big financial incentives, tax credits and loan guarantees, to people who will invest in poor areas in America. I've got a proposal before the Congress that says, look, let's give Americans who have the money to do it the same incentives to invest in poor areas in America they get to invest in poor areas in Latin America, in Africa, in Asia. I think it's very important.

We have Indian reservations where the unemployment rate is over 70 percent. We have lots of counties where the unemployment rate is over 20 percent in rural America. We've got to do that.

And finally, we have to find a way to live together better. You still—all these hate crimes are small examples of the big wars in Bosnia, in Kosovo, the continuing conflict in the Middle East. It's the same thing. People still, in this most modern of all age, define themselves in very primitive ways—they're scared to death of people who are different from them—different race, different religion, different ethnic group. Some are gay; some are straight. They get scared. And once you're scared of somebody, you didn't like them very much; you can't trust them; so it's a short step to dehumanize them, after which it's okay to be violent against them.

The number one challenge this country faces is building one America across all lines that divide us. And in some ways, I'm prouder of the work we've done in that than all the economic prosperity we've had. And if I had just one wish for America, it would be that we would be able to somehow unlock that mysterious set of factors that keep people apart. I wish every one of you had been with me in Kosovo the other day when I was over there with 2,000 kids in a school, and all these little kids coming up to me thanking me because the American soldiers had let them go home. And they had been—800,000 of them—driven out of their homes, ethnically cleansed. It would have made you so proud to be an American.

But just remember, when you see those things going on and then you see an African-American like James Byrd dragged to death in Texas, or a gay man like Matthew Shepard stretched out on a rack in Wyoming, or a crazy person kill a Korean Christian coming out of church in Indiana, right after he shot

down an African-American basketball coach in Illinois, it's the same thing.

So somebody will say, "Well, why did you go there?" Say, "Well, that crowd did a pretty good job, and I'm better off than I was 7 years ago, and the whole country is." But the main thing is, we have a profound responsibility to meet the big challenges of the future: the aging of America, the children of America, the balancing of work and family, growing the economy and the environment, bringing opportunity to poor areas, and building one America.

That's why I came down here tonight. I'm not running for anything, but I haven't done all this work to see it squandered by people who lose their concentration. If the election is about the right subject, we will win. And you have helped us immeasurably tonight. But I ask now for your voice, your compassion, and your consistent commitment all the way to November of 2000.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:13 p.m. at a private residence. In his remarks he referred to reception hosts Chris and Irene Korge and their children Andrew, Kristina, and Angela; and Gene Prescott, president, Biltmore Hotel.

Interview With Mark Knoller and Peter Maer of CBS Radio in Orlando, Florida

December 11, 1999

Domestic Challenges

Q. President Clinton, thank you very much for joining us for this special interview with CBS News. Heading into the next century, beyond your immediate goals for the rest of your term, what do you think are the one or two top domestic challenges facing the country?

The President. I think the aging of America and the children of the country. It's ironic that we seem to be growing at both ends. We're going to double the number of people over 65, and yet, we have the largest group of schoolchildren in our country's history in our schools, the first group bigger than the baby boomers, and they're much, much more diverse. They come from more different ethnic and racial and religious backgrounds. And

I think that dealing with them are the two biggest things that ought to be on the front burner.

I also believe that, related to that, obviously, as you've heard me say many times, is the challenge of continuing to grow the economy while reaching out into poor areas, continuing to improve the environment, and paying the debt off. I think those are the big, big challenges.

New Millennium

Q. Mr. President, one of the things I've noticed about these celebrations that the White House, you, and the First Lady are planning is that it's propagating the myth that January 1st is the start of the new millennium and the new century. Are you guilty of creating that erroneous impression?

The President. Yes. I mean, I think basically, by common consent, everybody decided that we ought to celebrate the millennium on January 1, 2000, even though most of the strict correctionists say that it's January 1, 2001.

Q. Well, they're right, aren't they?

The President. Well, apparently, that was the prevailing view among the experts, but the people have expressed a different wish, so we're going with the folks. We've got a democracy here, and that's the way we're going. It will be nice for me, maybe I can do it twice, and I'll be a President of two millennial changes.

Power of the Presidency

Q. Well, looking ahead into the next century, whenever it begins, where do you see the power of the Presidency itself evolving? Is it going to change?

The President. Oh, yes, it's always changing. But I think it will always—at least for the future that I can foresee—will continue to be an extremely important office. I think that a lot of the executive actions will be important, along with getting along with Congress. I think that building partnerships with the private sector will become more important. It will become more important to mobilize the American people and to organize them to meet the challenges in the future the way we've done.